
In the Master's Maison: Mobile Indigeneity in *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* and *Blue Ravens*

JOHN GAMBER

Those of us who work in Native American literature (and I imagine this includes anyone inclined to peruse this essay) are perfectly familiar with William Bevis's formulation of the homing plot. Within such narratives, a lost young Native protagonist ventures out into the world, becomes psychically and physically wounded, and returns home to heal.¹ For that matter, within these texts, the healing and the return are co-constitutive: they both represent a reintegration that is physical, psychological, cultural, and religious.² The examples abound, and such stories form the core of the Native American literary canon, from classics like *The Surrounded*, *House Made of Dawn*, and *Ceremony*, to more recent works including *Gardens in the Dunes* (as well as filmic examples set forth by *Powwow Highway* and *Smoke Signals* and continuing through *Barking Water* and *Empire of Dirt*). Indeed, such plotlines have become a formula for relative material success for Native authors and auteurs. Nonetheless, homing plots have never represented the totality or diversity of Native literature. After all, a worrisome potential implication of such texts is that Native people cannot (or, more to the point, are disallowed the potential to) relocate and still live healthy or happy lives. This implication proves not only treacherous but implausible in the face of the fact that the overwhelming majority of Native people live away from their tribal communities (2010 Census).

By contrast, a few novels exist that portray healthy Native individuals and groups away from their tribal nations.³ This essay looks at a pair of the more extreme examples of Indigenous mobility: James Welch's *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* (2001) and Gerald Vizenor's *Blue Ravens* (2014), both of which feature Native protagonists settling permanently in France.⁴ Each novel portrays a character relocating on a temporary basis, but ultimately choosing to stay—albeit under profoundly different circumstances. Setting these texts abroad allows their authors to imagine Indian people entirely outside the settler colonial context, which of course informs everything that happens within settler state borders. Considering these extra-colonial imaginative possibilities, we are apt to hope for happy endings for these Indigenous characters. Indeed, *Charging Elk*'s (the protagonist of Welch's novel) adaptation to France is often read as extremely positive. However, as I will demonstrate, his transition is in fact quite complicated,

and I argue, ambivalent at best. Such an ambivalence is fitting, when one considers that these moves out of settler colonial spaces are also moves in to colonizing metropolises; these Indigenous characters cannot simply cast off the colony or colonization. Specifically, Charging Elk represents an always-already (temporally) diasporic subject, removed from what he perceives to be home not only in space but also in time—even when he dwells in the Oglala Stronghold.⁵ The Beaulieu brothers of *Blue Ravens* (Aloysius and narrator Basile) remain similarly unchanged over the course of the novel in regard to their move to France. However, as Vizenor’s text establishes White Earth as a traditionally cosmopolitan space, it renders their movement and relocation to be a part of, rather than apart from, their communities and cultures. In light of these related circumstances, I look at the vexed and vexing portrayals of Native masculinity within these novels, each of which confronts warrior stereotypes and ideologies as deeply incomplete representations of Native people and cultures. Ultimately, I argue, these novels when read together portray the possibilities for Native movement and relocation.⁶ Such movement is not without incident, they suggest, but it is also neither *inherently* damaging nor liberatory.

Both novels portray young, male, Native protagonists who resist the physical stasis mandated by US governmental requirements of Indian people broadly—that they be bound to reservations not only (historically) as a form of containment if not outright incarceration, but also (more recently) in order to conform to a discourse of Native authenticity by which only reservation Indians count as “real Indians.”⁷ For Charging Elk, this resistance manifests in not only the rejection of, but intense disdain for his home community, which he sees as having ceded its freedom—and particularly as having surrendered a certain form of masculine power. The Beaulieus likewise ultimately reject their home community as a place to live, but see such a rejection as a continuation of Native liberty that is right for them, without demonizing those who choose to remain. I contend that the Beaulieus leave their home and family physically, but never do so psychically; Charging Elk does not intend to leave forever physically, though he has already left psychically.⁸

As much as these novels have in common—their settings around the turn of the century with young male Native protagonists (with close fraternal ties) relocated by variable degrees of chance and choice—their differences have to be noted.⁹ Centrally to this essay, while Charging Elk struggles to belong within any community for the entirety of the text, the Beaulieus never do. In his youth Charging Elk rejects domesticity and desires a homosocial community that glorifies

a masculinity that mirrors settler expectations of nomadic Native men.¹⁰ As I will show, Welch's protagonist's ideas about Oglala masculinity reject the models put forth by the men in his community. The Beaulieus might appear to revel in a similar masculinist impulse with their desire for travel and willingness to serve in war. Nevertheless, they emphasize in their younger days a return home and a focus on their community (shaped by women as much as by men), and embracing Native and non-Native influences where they are useful to them.¹¹ We also cannot skip over the fact that these young men come from different nations and regions, Charging Elk is Oglala Lakota from the Plains; the Beaulieus are Anishinaabeg from the Great Lakes.¹² Finally, while I note the close temporal proximity of these texts—set within thirty years of one another—that thirty-year span straddles monumental changes for Native communities across the country and for these two communities in particular. Welch's and Vizenor's attention to the historical milieus in which their characters find themselves signals the need for the contextualization of these monumental changes.¹³

Charging Elk finds his way from the Dakota Territory to France as a performer in Buffalo Bill's Wild West show.¹⁴ While in Marseille, Charging Elk becomes ill but decides to perform; he faints, falls from his horse, and awakens in the hospital, from which he flees. He finds his way back to the grounds where the troupe had performed, only to discover that they have left without him. Because he lacks any documentation and is not a citizen of the United States (citizenship not being conferred upon most Native people until 1924), he cannot leave France. After living in Marseille for about six years, Charging Elk awakens to find himself, having been drugged, being sexually assaulted. He kills his attacker and is sentenced to prison, where he remains for ten years, learning to farm in the prison fields. Upon his release, he begins to work on a farm outside of Agen, Aquitaine (in southwestern France), where he falls in love with Nathalie, the daughter of the farm owner; they marry, and Charging Elk determines that he will never return to his Oglala community, but will remain in France (Marseille, specifically).

Blue Ravens follows brothers Aloysius and Basil Beaulieu, the former a painter of increasing renown, known for the titular blue ravens prominent in his work, the latter a writer of short stories and poems, as well as the narrator of the text. The two grow up on the White Earth Reservation in what has become Minnesota. Their interest in international issues is stoked by their family's ownership and operation of the White Earth newspapers, *The Progress* and *The Tomahawk*, and their work selling the latter paper at the local train station (and from hearing

stories from the travelers they meet).¹⁵ The pair travels to Minneapolis, a trip that stands as a formative adventure. They later register for the draft and are activated to serve in the United States Army and fight in World War I. Upon their arrival in France, a nation to which they trace some of their ancestry, they are made into scouts “only as natives, and not because of any special training” (121). The sergeant who selects them for this service “was convinced that stealth was in our blood, a native trait and natural sense of direction even on a dark and rainy night in a strange place” (121). At war’s end, they return home, only to decide to relocate to France (Paris, specifically) to live out the bohemian lifestyle of the Lost Generation.

In his article “‘A World Away from His People’: James Welch’s *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* and the Indian Historical Novel,” James Donahue asserts, “Charging Elk suffers from just this alienation [“displacing Charging Elk, and forcing him to assimilate into a completely foreign culture”] and throughout the course of the novel works to reconstruct his cultural identity though separated from his family, his tribe, and his homeland” (59-60). Donahue’s is a common sentiment expressed in the criticism regarding this novel: that Charging Elk, disconnected from Oglala culture because of physical distance in France, forges a new, even healthy individual(istic) identity, expressing positive possibilities for Indigenous people in the face of the many displacements of settler colonialism.¹⁶ I argue that such readings are, at the very least, extremely incomplete, not in their advocacy of Indigenous mobility, but rather in that Charging Elk has already alienated himself from his community ideologically as well as physically prior to his arrival in Europe. We also note that this repeated privileging of individualism (especially when read in the face of Charging Elk’s condemnation of his community and elders) chafes against many Oglala values expressed in the novel.

Charging Elk’s diasporic subjectivity is born of a collective trauma; the reader first encounters him as an eleven-year-old boy witnessing the surrender of the Oglala at the Red Cloud Agency in 1877. Indeed, the opening sentence of the novel’s prologue concludes with mourning: “It was early in the Moon of the Shedding Ponies, less than a year after the fight with the longknives on the Greasy Grass, and the people looked down in the valley and they saw the white man’s fort and several of the women wept” (1). The Greasy Grass translates the Lakota name for the space on which an alliance of Lakota, Cheyenne, and Arapaho forces defeated the Seventh Cavalry of the United States, led by George Armstrong Custer, a clash also known as the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Within a year of this celebrated victory, the Indigenous forces

had disbanded, and Oglala leaders, weary from a brutal winter's flight, chose to end their military actions. Thus, within this first sentence in the novel's prologue, Welch establishes a historical moment that will undergird its protagonist's worldview throughout. The Oglala have slid from being free people, victors over the US military, to being subjugated by that same nation and military.

This slide from glory is further exemplified within the prologue, this backstory that Welch includes prior to chapter one, by Red Cloud himself. The narrator explains, "he had been a great war chief then. Now he was a reservation Indian and had been one for ten years. Now he took his orders from white chiefs....Still, in his clean buckskins, with his headdress that flowed over his horse's rump,...he looked as dignified and powerful as ever—a chief" (2). We note the contrast between Red Cloud taking his orders from white chiefs and looking the part of a chief himself through the passage's transitional "still." Red Cloud was once dignified and powerful, but now he is a reservation Indian. In short, from the very beginning of *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*, its narrative persona, a third person omniscient perspective that continually returns to Charging Elk's point of view (though also giving considerable attention to the POVs of non-Native characters upon Charging Elk's time in France), establishes a contrast between particularly masculine power and dignity on the one hand, and an implicitly feminized reservation life on the other.

This contrast continues into the body of the text, and we note that Charging Elk maintains some of his harshest criticisms for those closest to him. In describing Charging Elk's father the novel explains:

Scrub had been a shirtwearer, one of the bravest and wisest of the Oglalas. He had fought hard at Little Bighorn and had provided meat when the people were running from the soldiers. But that winter when the people were starving and sick, he had become a peacemaker, just like the reservation Indians who were sent out by their white bosses to try to talk the band into surrendering. Charging Elk had been ashamed of his father that winter. And when he saw his father sitting idly in his little shack, drinking the black medicine and sometimes telling the holy beads, he could not believe his father had gone from shirtwearer to this. It was always this image of his father that drove Charging Elk time and time again back out to the Stronghold. (17)

Like the novel’s description of Red Cloud (which we can now discern at least mirrors Charging Elk’s perspective), this reading of Scrub moves from triumphalist martial figure to defeat and shame. However, Scrub’s accomplishments during his former glory days were not only military; he is also described as wise, generous, and caretaking. Once again, Charging Elk judges harshly an elder of his community for becoming a “peacemaker, just like the reservation Indians.” His father transforms from man of action into idler, and perhaps worse, a Christian. The novel explicitly states Charging Elk’s shame of his father as peacemaker, privileging an eternal war rather than this acquiescence, regardless of the lives that Scrub’s decisions almost certainly saved, and the fact that he may still be wise, generous, and caretaking.¹⁷

Contrasting these fallen icons of Oglala masculinity, Charging Elk opts out of reservation life. He and his kola, Strikes Plenty, choose what they see as a freer existence at the Stronghold, despite, or perhaps because of the fact that this distances them in multiple ways from the majority of their tribal community. The narrator explains, “The Indians out there were considered bad Indians, even by their own people who had settled at the agency and the surrounding communities. Charging Elk and Strikes Plenty lived off and on at the Stronghold for the next nine years, hunting game, exploring, learning and continuing the old ways with the help of two old medicine people” (14). These two young men see themselves as culture keepers, maintaining the “old ways,” guided by elders. A large part of this cultural maintenance comes in the form of isolation, though, with Charging Elk and Strikes Plenty straying on adventures, just the two of them. *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*, however, demonstrates the dangers to such isolation, namely those of scorn and disassociation. Reflecting back on his time at the Stronghold after just a few months in Marseille, Charging Elk recalls how he and Strikes Plenty had “prided themselves on their ability with bows, shooting birds and rabbits with the steel-tipped arrows. Most of the others, even those at the Stronghold, had long since given up this traditional weapon. And when they ran out of bullets, they had to tighten their belts” (164). The pair see themselves as more traditional not only than those who have chosen reservation life, but also their peers at the Stronghold. They maintain their ability to hunt with the bow, a traditional Lakota weapon. It is striking, however, that their arrows are “steel-tipped,” this metal being a post-contact technology. Steel arrowheads are reusable; bullets are not. So, Charging Elk’s and Strikes Plenty’s hunting practices serve a pragmatic purpose. But, the text explains that at least part of their pride stems from the “traditional” aspect of this weapon. Traditional, here and throughout

Charging Elk's musings, carries a connotation not of adaptation, but of that which is old-fashioned, of that which statically maintains the old ways. In this context, Charging Elk negates his own adaptations to steel arrows, and the novel's inclusion of this detail encourages an evaluation of the protagonist's misconceptions of the traditional. As Cobb-Greetham explains, "Charging Elk had very specific ideas about what it meant to live as an Oglala person. Because of his strict interpretation, he left boarding school, left his family to live at the Stronghold, mocked the reservation Indians, and felt shame toward his father for becoming a reservation peacekeeper" (165). These strict definitions of Oglala (masculine) identity revolve around maintaining what he believes are the practices of the past, a rigid notion that belies the adaptations that all peoples engage in. We might contrast Charging Elk's ideas regarding traditionalism to Craig Womack's critical intervention to that term. In *Red on Red* he asserts, "I wish to posit an alternative definition of traditionalism as anything that is useful to Indian people in retaining their values and worldviews, no matter how much it deviates from what people did one or two hundred years ago" (41-42). According to such an approach, one that allows Native people to adapt (like members of any other culture), there is nothing more or less traditional about hunting with stone or steel arrowheads or with rifles.

The novel's invitation to question Charging Elk's traditionalism continues in its next paragraph. The text reminisces that Charging Elk and Strikes plenty "had lived a strange life together for eleven winters—no family, no other friends...for the most part, they had lived away from others; consequently, Charging Elk had felt uncomfortable around families, especially children" (164). Theirs is a deeply isolated existence; though they learn to some degree from elders at the Stronghold, they are mostly alone, trying to find their ways in the world. While Charging Elk seems to prefer this homosocial setting (whereas Strikes Plenty hopes eventually to wed and "settle down"), Charging Elk recognizes that it is "strange" to live, not simply apart from one's family, but apart from all families. As such, he does not learn key elements of Oglala culture, elements relating to interactions with children, yes, but also those involving parents, spouses, brothers and sisters, and so many more—he has simply opted out of them. Moreover, it is difficult to view his disdain for so many of his elders (including his parents) as a traditional Oglala virtue. All of this is to say that contrary to the widespread reading that Charging Elk becomes lost absent the lodestone of his culture and language upon arriving in France, he has in fact been disconnected for the entirety of the reader's familiarity with him.

Recent scholarship shows the ways that the model of masculinity imposed on Native communities in particular has often come in the form of the warrior or “brave.” This martial imagery creates the alien other as the enemy against which the settler state can imagine and measure itself, in part to deem itself the civilized counter to the Indigenous savage. Taiaiake Alfred explains, “For the violence of conquest you needed a violent opponent, so you created this image of the Native as a violent warrior, the classic horseback opponent... The way to confront that and to defeat it and to recover something meaningful for Natives is to put the image of the Native male back into its proper context, which is in the family” (79).¹⁸ The hypermasculine Native warrior image becomes reified by settler inventions including Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show in which Charging Elk gleefully participates, despite the misgivings of many in his community. The novel explains, “Of course, he knew that it was all fake and that some of the elders back home disapproved of the young men going off to participate in the white man’s sham” (52). Alfred continues, asserting that Indigenous communities place men within “the context of a family with responsibilities to the family—to the parent, to the spouse, to the children (or nephews, nieces,...or even just youth in general)” (79). Alfred moves us from the flat stereotype of the Native warrior to the round embodiment of Native men (emphasizing as well that this identification is not biologically defined) as serving in the role of warrior at times, but also serving roles that nurture within their communities. Similarly, Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair notes, “One of the legacies of colonization has been the separation of men from their roles within families, communities, and nations. What’s replaced these are the hegemonic forms of... individualist identities that ossify cultures” (225). The hegemonic constructs of Native masculinity we continue to encounter shape expectations of violence over care-giving, and individualism over community.

Narratives of specifically Oglala masculinity as measured ultimately by one’s warrior positionality, moreover, echo Vine Deloria Jr.’s foundational chapter, “Anthropologists and Other Friends” from *Custer Died for Your Sins*. Deloria notes that the Oglala “tribe became a favorite subject for study [by anthropologists] quite early because of its romantic past. Gradually theories arose to explain the apparent lack of progress of the Oglala Sioux. The real issue, white control of the reservation, was overlooked completely” (90). Instead, “anthros” advanced their own theories, including that “the Oglala were WARRIORS WITHOUT WEAPONS” (90). Deloria continues, “Every conceivable difference between the Oglala Sioux and the folks at

Hyannisport was attributed to the quaint warrior tradition of the Oglala Sioux. From lack of roads to unshined shoes Sioux problems were generated, so the anthros discovered, by the refusal of the white man to recognize the great desire of the Oglalas to go to war” (91). He concludes with his classic biting wit, “Why expect an Oglala to become a small businessman when he was only waiting for that wagon train to come around the bend?” (91). This last sentiment, particularly with its invocation of the wagon train as a mode of transit that exists in what anthros imagine to be the temporal present for Oglala people proffers them as static denizens of the past, a standard settler move that eliminates Indigenous populations from the present.¹⁹

Thus we so often encounter people who speak about Native people exclusively in the past tense: “Native Americans believed...” Kevin Bruyneel describes this construct as “colonial time,” and Charging Elk himself seems to buy into it. Bruyneel asserts:

important temporal boundaries, while often implicit, can be located in economic, cultural, and political narratives that place limitations on the capacity of certain peoples to express meaningful agency and autonomy, especially in the modern context. These narratives place temporal boundaries between an ‘advancing’ people and a ‘static’ people, locating the latter out of time, in what I call *colonial time* (2).

I argue that such a static viewpoint of Native identity renders Charging Elk diasporic not so much in terms of space as in time. Such a temporal diaspora can never be ended, of course, as a return to a time passed is even more complicated than a spatial return to homeland—though we must always also remember that space and time are co-constitutive. Charging Elk, more than most of his compatriots it seems, has internalized the logic of elimination, colonial time, and the narrative of the disappearing Indian.²⁰

For Deloria, such elimination works on multiple fronts. First, it obscures settler colonial responsibility for the marginalized conditions of Indigenous populations, generally. Second, it misdirects funds and energies that might assist Oglala people; “Real problems and real people become invisible before the great romantic notion that the Sioux yearn for the days of Crazy Horse and Red Cloud and will do nothing until those days return” (91). Third, it becomes a hegemonic expectation of Oglala people in both out-group and in-group minds. The dominant discourse surrounding Native people is often replicated in Native ideas about Indianness just as it is within settler society broadly. Charging Elk represents one character’s acceptance of this same warrior mythos of Oglala masculinity.²¹ Ironically, for him, to be Oglala is to be ever physically

mobile (hence, his repeatedly demonstrated fear of remaining in one place) while being ideologically and temporally static.

Over the course of the novel, however, Charging Elk comes to change his tune considerably on this particular front, especially in terms of his relationship to and opinions about agriculture. An early manifestation of Charging Elk’s character valorizes his life at the Stronghold as opposed to the stationary and farming lifestyle adopted by his parents: “There was nothing left at home. The American bosses were making the *ikce wicasa* plant potatoes and corn. What kind of life was that for the people who ran the buffaloes?” (29). On its face, Charging Elk’s condemnation of his the life at home hinges on the fact that it is agricultural (farming two crops which are indigenous to the Americas, for the record). As we will see shortly, Charging Elk alters his view regarding farming, even when that farming is less than voluntary. But, in the meantime, we note that he views any life apart from running with the buffaloes to be a defeat.²²

Nonetheless, when he first engages in this European-style agriculture, he finds tremendous comfort in it, despite the fact that his experience comes during his incarceration. The narrative tells us, “In the gardens, it was easy to forget. All the hard work beneath a blazing sun or a chilling rain blocked out any despair that he would remain in La Tombe until they carried him out for burial in the plot not far to the north of the garden” (357). Working in the fields and orchards outside the prison provides Charging Elk an emotional escape but also a preoccupation and distraction from the time in his cell. On this level, he has perhaps come to an acceptance of farming in a world he has no power to change. In his incarceration he mirrors his family, similarly incarcerated in a nineteenth-century reservation space from which they were denied egress, though his preoccupation differs in that the Oglala community is bound by the very nation *occupying* their land. Nonetheless, we must be careful not to conflate his appreciation of farming at this stage in the novel with a necessarily pure enjoyment of it (as he perhaps should understand his father’s and community’s acceptance of what may have felt equally inescapable).

Charging Elk emerges from prison into a burgeoning domestic romance plot, establishing a neolocal home with the daughter of the man on whose farm he finds work.²³ He and Nathalie wed and relocate back to Marseille where he finds work and joins the dockworkers’ union, while the couple awaits the birth of their first child. Charging Elk at long last begins to develop interpersonal relationships, romantic, professional/fraternal, and familial. Moreover, he demonstrates changes in terms of the ideals of Lakota conservatism he held to in his youth. He

looks upon a cathedral, “Notre Dame de la Garde in Marseille—a shining beacon that one could see from a long way off that might offer guidance to lost souls like himself” (378). The narrator clarifies, “It was the first time he had ever been in a *wasichu* church, and it didn’t seem to be a bad place. He thought of the times he had gotten angry with his parents and the other Lakotas for going to the white man’s church” (383). Now that he has allowed adaptations in his own life, Charging Elk has let go of much of his condemnation of others for their adaptations.

This move toward acceptance, if not a wholesale embrace of his life in France, however, is not without its drawbacks. Most notably, the reader encounters a protagonist who continues to relinquish his relationships to the community into which he was born. The Wild West show returns to Marseille, and Charging Elk seeks out the actors in their village. Upon finding a Lakota family, he inquires after his parents. One of the performers, Joseph, tells him that his mother, “Double Strike Woman still lives at Pine Ridge Agency. She has a little cabin. She is well” (430). His father, however, “died three winters ago. Influenza. I didn’t know him well, but there was a big ceremony at the church, then at the community hall. Everybody went” (431). The community recognizes Charging Elk’s father, honoring him in ways that Charging Elk certainly never has. Joseph continues, “He was an important man, your father—a shirtwearer.... You should have been home for him” (431). Charging Elk replies, “You are right, Joseph.... I failed him—and my mother. For a long time I have thought only of myself” (431).²⁴ Joseph righteously chastises Charging Elk for his failure to return to Pine Ridge, a failure that the reader also recognizes as a lack of effort on Charging Elk’s part. One should certainly mitigate these realizations with Charging Elk’s institutionalization, the psychic and physical containment that his incarceration has wrought upon him. Nonetheless, Welch opts to show Charging Elk continuing—or repeating—the distance from his community that he has always maintained.

To that end, Charging Elk describes for Joseph a particularly resonant dream he has had, in which he tries to jump off a cliff at the Stronghold, “but every time he tried, a big gust of wind blew him back... he looked down and he saw his people lying in a heap at the bottom... in the roar [of the wind] he heard a voice, a familiar voice, a Lakota voice, and it said, ‘You are my only son.’ And when he turned back to his village at the Stronghold, there was nothing there—no people, no horses or lodges... Everything was gone” (235).²⁵ Throughout the novel, Charging Elk struggles to try to interpret this dream. Joseph, however, explains that the voice is his mother’s, “She was telling you to come home. She needs you now.” Charging Elk’s reply,

simply: “I can’t” (436). Charging Elk has never served as the kind of son that his community, it appears, continues to expect. He has never directed his energies toward maintaining bonds with his people—he admits these motivations to be “selfish.”²⁶ When we consider that the novel offers the Lakota term for settlers as “*wasicuns*, the fat takers,” a term that implies that they take the best parts for themselves, Charging Elk’s selfishness rings with particular aspersion (13).²⁷ We need not liken Charging Elk’s brand of self-centeredness with the colonizing forces of the settler state, rather we can note a general emphasis within Oglala culture that privileges the community over the individual.

Vizenor’s novel begins just a few years after the temporal setting of *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* and moves through the end of World War I. Indeed, it is quite reasonable to think that Charging Elk himself would have been in France, like Vizenor’s Beaulieu brothers, during the war. Despite these temporal overlaps, though, Vizenor’s tale of Native relocation to France differs considerably, and demonstrates a much greater emphasis on the agency of his characters and on the positive aspects of their international movements. Both of these elements emphasize Vizenor’s usual opposition to narratives of Native victimry. He defines survivance as contrapuntal, “an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry” (*Manifest Manners* vii).²⁸

Again, we must engage with key differences between these novels: Vizenor’s text pairs Native characters together (we can imagine that if Charging Elk and Strikes Plenty were together the text would have been quite different); the brothers are, moreover, allowed to return to the US and then, informed by that freedom of movement, choose to return to France (opportunities that Charging Elk is clearly not afforded). The Beaulieus also trace ancestry to France; their name derives from “*beau lieu*, ... a beautiful place in French. That fur-trade surname became our union of ironic stories, necessary art, and our native liberty” (1). The union is not only of the Anishinaabe and the French language; their name stems from a moment in contact prior to the establishment of the settler colonial nations that would be formed around Anishinaabe lands (the United States and Canada). French men came to trap furs, inculcating Indigenous people in transatlantic trade; some remained, and were adopted into Anishinaabe communities (as many Indigenous traders and travelers had been before).²⁹ The beauty of place, wrapped up in their French/Anishinaabe surname, rings with significance as well. These Indigenous characters are

tioned to place in the ways that the very term indigeneity implies: Born or produced naturally in a land or region (OED). This definition of indigeneity offers only that people are *from* a specific land. All too often, however, Indigenous people face being disregarded, unrecognized, or refused in the face of not remaining on that land. As discussed earlier, they are deemed inauthentic if they do not live within the territories set apart as Indigenous spaces.

Patrick Wolfe deems such enforced ties to place a form of “repressive authenticity.” He explains, “the narrative structure of repressive authenticity is that of the excluded middle. The more polarised the binary representation, the wider its intervening catchment of empirical inauthenticity (“Nation and Miscegenation” 112). The settler state establishes itself in contradistinction to the Indigenous population. Anything settlers do, Indigenous people necessarily do not. As such, any action that an Indigenous person does that mirrors the settler renders that Indigenous person inauthentic—they no longer count as Native. Indeed, settler assimilationist impulses and legal actions (including boarding schools and allotment) were meant precisely to eliminate the Indianness from Indians.³⁰ In this context, in order to be recognized as Indigenous by the settler state, it is not enough to be *from* a land or region, one must *remain* there.³¹ The Beaulieus, who carry a name constructed around place, however, prove to be wanderers, refusing such settler constructions of static indigeneity.

These Anishinaabe characters’ return to another ancestral home invokes great excitement. As they approach France in anticipation of their combat tour, Basile explains, “I could not sleep that night and was out early to catch the first sight of the country of our distant ancestors, the fur traders. The war provided the curious notion of a magical return and at the same time a discovery. Actually the native romance of the fur trade and agonies of war was a revelation of the heart not the irony of discovery” (107). Vizenor plays with the construct of discovery here, twisting its perspective from Europeans discovering the Americas to Indigenous Americans discovering Europe. Instead of such an “irony of discovery,” Vizenor offers the “revelation of the heart,” a far more apt term for finding oneself in a new place already densely populated with humans. It is not a discovery, but a revelation, a revealing of that which was always there, but about which the supposed discoverer did not know. The revelation here is both of the land of the protagonists’ ancestors and of their own emotional responses to that land.

Vizenor’s work has long been claimed by certain cosmopolitan critics as representing Native art and cultures as always hybridized. I have elsewhere challenged this categorization,

arguing that his writing has always been profoundly tied to the specifics of Anishinaabe story and place.³² As if right on trickster cue, in *Blue Ravens*, Vizenor invokes the name of cosmopolitanism overtly as a descriptor of White Earth as a community. He notes that with the introduction of newspapers, “Straightaway the reservation became a new cosmopolitan culture of national and international news. White Earth became a cosmopolitan community” (18). While many at the turn of the twentieth century imagined Native communities to be provincial (this is alas true of many at the turn of the twenty-first century as well), *Blue Ravens* contends that White Earth has always been drawn toward engagement with the world far beyond its own borders. Moreover, in their movements, the Beaulieu brothers are supported by their elders. As Basile notes, “Our uncle consented to the earth as a country, and to natives as world citizens” (91). The entire world as “a country” (as opposed to “country” without an article, or “the country”) articulates precisely a cosmopolitan positionality. Native people are citizens of the world—as any people can be if they recognize their connections beyond the provincial.

The Anishinaabe characters of *Blue Ravens* offer a counter point to Charging Elk’s ideas of a singular or provincial form of masculinity. There is no limit to the Beaulieu’s constructions of what is appropriate for Anishinaabe people (of whatever gender). These men are soldiers, but they are not interested in being soldiers as a mode of existence. Being a warrior is a temporally limited activity for them, one that involves defending the liberties of those who are under attack. Along these lines, Aloysius’s and Basile’s uncle exclaims, “only a vagrant would not fight for his country, and natives have fought for centuries to be citizens of the earth, the reservation, and of the country” (91). If we recall that the world here serves as the country, then we understand that people who are related to place, as he implies we all should be (vagrant seldom serving as a compliment), must recognize that having a place in the world means having responsibilities to it and to our relations within it. Isolationism is a mark of a lesser being.³³

While it offers a positive slant on Native relocations, this is not to say that *Blue Ravens* takes a blasé approach to Native *dislocations*. The reader learns early in the novel that the Beaulieus, like Charging Elk, “were required to attend the government school on the reservation, and too many native students were sent away to boarding schools” (18). Children in these schools are educated away from their communities and taught a disrespect for them as well as for their language, religion, and culture. We also note that Vizenor writes not only of Anishinaabe people during this era, but of Native students broadly. He further connects the other-than-human

to this thread—particularly in terms of Anishinaabe relationships to the trees of their nation’s forests (a concern we see throughout Vizenor’s work, perhaps most notably in *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*).³⁴ As the boys travel by train, taking an adventure to the big city, “we wondered ... about the timber that built the houses in Minneapolis. We were native migrants in the same new world that had created the timber ruins of the White Earth Reservation” (27). The denuding of the forests parallels the denuding of the cultural landscape of White Earth, and of Indian Country broadly. They are stripped bare for the benefit of a settler society that cares nothing about the vacuums, the lifeless spaces they leave behind.

Upon their return to the US, the Beaulieus find a triumphalist nation beating its chest as vanquishers of imperial oppressors, but continuing to refuse Native people rights as citizens either of sovereign nations or of the United States. “The soldiers who returned that summer were hardly prepared to become the precious resurrection of patriotism... We were both inspired by the mystery, anxiety, and irony of the passage to war, to the country of our ancestors of the fur trade, but the actual return was futile, and the sense of vain nostalgia only increased with the patriotic hurrah and celebrations” (169). Such a calling out of vain nostalgia certainly counters Charging Elk’s approach. Indeed, what these Native veterans find is the irony of being Indigenous soldiers returning to a settler colonial state. Basile explains, “The native soldiers who were once the military occupiers had returned to the ironic situation of the occupied on a federal reservation” (175). He further notes, “We returned to a federal occupation on the reservation. Our return to the reservation was neither peace nor the end of the war” (170). The Beaulieus return to a home that is even more colonially triumphalist than it had been before and choose not to remain. However, White Earth is not unlivable because the community accepts this triumphalism, but rather because that triumphalism is being thrust upon it. That is, unlike Charging Elk, the Beaulieus never blame their community for colonialism, or for being subjected to it. For them, the blame lies, as it rightly should, with the invaders.³⁵

The loosened seams of a bounded space allow these Native men to move, but they have always been allowed such relocations. The Beaulieus choose to return to France, though this expatriate lifestyle does not equate to an abandonment of their relationship to White Earth or of their identities as Anishinaabe people. Rather, it merely expands the scope of where Anishinaabe people live. The novel concludes by retracing the steps of the Beaulieus from the reservation to their first trip to the city, into France during the war, and to Paris in their final relocation. Basile

explains, “Natives continued the stories of our ancestors in natural motion at the headwaters of the Great River. The stories continued at the livery stable, government school, reservation hospital, Orpheum Theatre, Château-Thierry, Square du Vert-Galant, Café du Dôme, and Le Chemin du Montparnasse” (283). Vizenor’s emphasis on continuation, on the maintenance of connections backward and forward across time and space refuses the tragic and the irreparable that we note in Charging Elk’s refusal to return home.

I offer my alternative reading of Charging Elk as a character and of Welch’s novel not to diminish the text—indeed quite the opposite. Like all of his work, Welch’s *The Heartsong of Charging Elk* is, among other things, a rich and complex marvel of descriptive prose. Rather, I contend that (again like much of Welch’s writing), the protagonist is intentionally deeply flawed. It would be short-sighted, even wrong-headed, considering his cultural context, to ignore, let alone laud Charging Elk’s denial of communal obligations or his lack of respect for his elders, just as it would be to condemn him for his desire to see the world or his attempts to make what life he can for himself in France.³⁶ Welch’s writing is always more subtle, nuanced, and honest than that. Readers must bear in mind, as might be difficult at first blush, that Charging Elk is not damaged solely because he is lost in France; he was damaged to begin with. Much of that damage comes, as it does for the Beaulieu brothers, at the hands of violence propagated by imperialism. Both texts offer possibilities by which Native men might contend with their own masculinities and their relationships to community away from home. Welch’s text, especially as regards Charging Elk’s life prior to his departure with the Wild West show, reads more as a manual of how *not* to do so. By contrast, Vizenor’s offers a way to do so without severing ties, without denying relationships and responsibilities. That is, only one of these novels offers Native movements outside of the frameworks of tragedy and victimry.

Notes

¹ Bevis contrasts Native narratives of “homing in” to the European and Euro-American bildungsroman—the “leaving” plot in which the (usually male) liberal humanist individual(ist) self sets out to find himself away from the constraints of the “ancien regime” of his roots (581). Accordingly, Maselstien declares Welch’s novel “a Native American *bildungsroman*” (94). Shanley makes a similar point regarding Welch’s text and others from the Native American Renaissance “looking for the way back” (167). She also places this novel in very useful context of Welch’s other work.

² Countless Native American and Indigenous traditions, of course, view being grounded in specific place as fundamental to health in all of these forms. Homing plots reflect some of the positive elements of those values.

³ Much of Louis Owens' oeuvre, Louise Erdrich's *The Antelope Wife*, Leslie Marmon Silko's *Gardens in the Dunes*, Vizenor's *Hiroshima Bugi* and *Griever*, for example.

⁴ For recent historical scholarship on such transatlantic journeys, see Weaver, Thrush, Ferguson, and Jaskulski.

⁵ Stronghold Mesa is a craggy outcropping and district within what is now Badlands National Park, which the Oglala Lakota co-administer with the United States. This region, like the Black Hills, carries a resonance of resistance throughout Native discourse beyond, though because of, its specifically Oglala socio-historical contexts. Shanley also wields the concept of diaspora to read Charging Elk's situation, albeit with a different focus.

⁶ I use the word "relocation" here only in its broadest sense, and not in specific reference to the United States' policies formalized under the American Indian Relocation Program of 1956. Both novels clearly, and rightly, condemn such forced and coerced assimilative programs. Nonetheless, both speak to the survivance of Native people and peoples in the face of such ethnocidal impulses.

⁷ Examples of such ideas abound in the troubling purity discourses that surround Indigenous people within settler states. We can think of the attention to who counts as a "real Indian" in Alexie's work (such as *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian*, *Flight*, *Indian Killer*, and *Smoke Signals*) and, as just one example, Eva Marie Garrouette's *Real Indians: Identity and the Survival of Native America*. Such discourse reflects what Wolfe calls "repressive authenticity" (discussed further below).

⁸ For this reason, and because this essay is particularly meant to serve as a corrective to criticism about *The Heartsong of Charging Elk*, I devote more attention to Welch's novel than I do to Vizenor's.

⁹ Each novel centralizes chosen family. The Beaulieaus are brothers, though they are not biologically related. Charging Elk's most meaningful relationship, at least for the majority of the novel, comes with his kola (a Lakota word often translated as "brother friend"), Strikes Plenty.

¹⁰ I allude, of course, to Sedgwick's construction "homosocial desire," which she notes is "a kind of oxymoron" rife with both "discriminations and paradoxes" (1). Sedgwick, discussing representations in 18th and 19th Century literature, finds portrayals that reinforce the thesis that, among other things, men deflect homosexual desires (compulsorily contrasted to the heterosexual and homosocial) onto women. This construction of homosociality proves especially fitting within Welch's novel as its protagonist's defining moment comes in a spectacularly violent assault on one of its few homosexual characters, none of whom, as Womack notes, are portrayed in a remotely positive light ("Fatal Blow Job"). To that end, Krupat adds, "It is unlikely, indeed almost impossible, that a Lakota of Charging Elk's generation would have considered a winkte [a Lakota term translated in contemporary contexts as 'two spirit'] to be evil in something like the way in which the Catholic René Soulas considers homosexuals evil. But Welch does not use the word winkte anywhere in the novel" ("History" 250).

¹¹ The brothers are especially influenced by their mother, Margaret, but other prominent characters in their community include Messy Fairbanks and Catherine Heady.

¹² There are profound cultural distinctions between these communities as well, of course. Such ethnographic elements lie beyond the scope of this essay. For more on linguistic and social

contexts pertaining to Welch’s novel, see Womack (“Fatal Blow Job”) and Krupat (“History”). Each of these pays profoundly important attention to notes of homophobia that many readers find in *Heartsong*.

¹³ Most notably, Welch’s turbulent temporal choice for his novel, with Charging Elk leaving the U.S. in 1889, has him present for the shrinking of tribal land holdings under the various iterations, violations, and abrogations of the Fort Laramie Treaty (including settler invasion of the Black Hills), and Oglala surrender at the Red Cloud Agency to end the Great Sioux War (1877) as a boy, but absent for the establishment of the Pine Ridge Agency and South Dakota statehood (1889), the Wounded Knee Massacre (1890), and the imagined closing of the frontier. Vizenor’s characters especially note the role of allotment (as seen under the 1887 Dawes Act for Native communities broadly but especially the 1889 Nelson Act for Anishinaabe reservations) which mandated lifestyle assimilation through private, rather than communal, landholding (especially as European-style farming) as well as opening up “surplus” land to settler interests—particularly timber interests—as well as World War I.

¹⁴ This, the most famous, but by no means only, frontier show, featuring reenactments of American frontier life and historical events such as the Battle at the Little Bighorn (1876). Buffalo Bill’s show ran from 1883-1913, touring particularly in the eastern United States and Europe as well as a famous and exceptionally successful stint at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair. The tour travelled throughout Europe beginning in 1887. Welch’s novel serves as a creative historiography following the actual death of performer Featherman from smallpox on January 6, 1890 (Maddra 66). In the novel, Featherman and Charging Elk are conflated in the French bureaucracy with Charging Elk being declared dead. For more, see Cobb-Greetham, Krupat “Issues,” Maddra, McNenly, Griffen, Moses, and Russell.

In another moment of cross-over between these texts, we learn that Julius, a non-Native trader who is friends with another trader, Odysseus, who frequents White Earth, “sponsored a company of natives to attend the Paris *Exposition Universelle* in 1889. The natives lived and traveled for about a year in France. The trader had met the army scout and impresario... Buffalo Bill, several times in Nebraska Territory, but he had never seen the circus show of the Wild West until he attended the Paris Exposition” (83).

¹⁵ *The Progress* was published between 1886 and 1889 by cousins Augustus (Gus) Beaulieu, Aloysius’s and Basile’s uncle in *Blue Ravens*, and Theodore (Theo) Beaulieu. *The Tomahawk* (1903-1927) began under Gus Beaulieu’s watch, and he returned as editor for a time, but ownership and editorial duties changed hands on multiple occasions. For more, see Spry, Vizenor *The People Named the Chippewa*, *Chronicling America*.

¹⁶ Jaskulski, for example, suggests, “Staying overseas comes at the cost of estrangement: linguistic, cultural and communal” (48). See also Ferguson, Haselstein, and Bak. This is not to say these essays lack value, merely that I see them as off-base on this point.

¹⁷ Scott Richard Lyons’s *X-Marks: Native Signatures of Assent* offers a useful corrective here, specifically in terms of the agency and leadership demonstrated by Native representatives in treaty negotiations and peacemaking. He addresses the decisions made that, at least it was hoped, “would keep ‘Indians’ viable for at least seven generations, strengthen existing communities, enhance our political independence, and provide the greatest degree of happiness for the greatest number of Indians” (50).

¹⁸ Morgensen adds, “colonial masculinity sustains both colonial and heteropatriarchal power by presenting its victims as the cause and proper recipients of its own violations” (55).

¹⁹ I am drawing on Patrick Wolfe's use of elimination, of course. He explains, "elimination refers to more than the summary liquidation of Indigenous people, though it includes that. In its positive aspect, the logic of elimination marks a return whereby the native repressed continues to structure settler-colonial society. It is both as complex social formation and as continuity through time that I term settler colonization a structure rather than an event" (390). Elimination comes in the form of rendering Indigenous people invisible, irrelevant, or inauthentic in order to justify settler land claims (and, indeed, existence), as well as to reinforce settler sociocultural elements as "common sense."

²⁰ Speaking to the image of the vanishing Indian, and perhaps to General Philip Sheridan's legacy, the novel explains that after the aforementioned bureaucratic snafu, "as far as the good doctor, and the city of Marseille, and, of course, the Republic of France, are concerned, Charging Elk is dead, plain and simple" (158). Upon further query, it is declared, "He is nonexistent, a ghost you might say" (178). To that end, Haselstein likewise argues, "The nostalgic image of the warrior provides protection and identity but also turns Charging Elk into an allegorical character in a past constructed to provide an image of the American nation" (96).

²¹ For more on the tensions still extant in Indigenous communities surrounding such warrior constructions and related toxic masculinities, see Innes and Alexander and McKegney. In the latter, a collection of interviews, Sinclair articulates an all too common misconception regarding being a protector or a warrior as a self-chosen identity, reminding that "Protectorship is something you earn. Indigenous men don't start off as protectors; they inherit it through work, mentorship, and being recognized" (226). Sinclair's emphasis on inheritance is important: it only comes from within and with close ties to the community and only by the bequeathing from others. Charging Elk, then, cannot claim warrior status; such a position must be earned from recognition from the very community he denies.

²² At the same time we can read his aspersions as primarily stemming from the fact that this agricultural foodway is mandated by "American bosses."

²³ Charging Elk serves ten years of a life sentence; he is released on what some might (erroneously) call a technicality. An attorney explains to him, "It seems you were tried as a citizen of the United States of America. As it turns out, by treaty, your tribe is its own separate nation and therefore not subject to the legal agreements between the United States and France. Thus the reclassification from the common criminal to political prisoner. You have been held illegally all these years" (361).

²⁴ Welch's choice in naming this character Joseph, not only an English name (Anglicized from Hebrew), but one central to Abrahamic religions (the husband of Mary, mother of Jesus in the New Testament, of course, but more aptly in this case, the favored and multi-colored coat-wearing son whose fate is bound to his dreams in Genesis 37), demonstrates some of the folly of Charging Elk's thinking about the static nature of his community. After all, it is Joseph who maintains ties to the Oglala community that Charging Elk had largely abandoned even prior to his sojourn in Europe.

²⁵ Haselstein adds that this dream's "You are my only son" may refer to "Matthew 3:17 ('You are my beloved son') and thus allude to the soteriological framework the novel repeatedly invokes" (99).

²⁶ Elsewhere the novel explains, "Somewhere along the way, he had lost that desire to share, replaced by an attention only to himself and his own desires" (243).

²⁷ One wonders if the positive readings of Charging Elk stem from a dominant liberal humanism that likewise privileges the individual over his commitments to community.

²⁸ Vizenor offers a classical European allusion, specifically to Homer’s *Odyssey*, to counter the homing plot for his characters. Indeed, Homer crafts the classic homing plot, the story of a man trying to return home. Vizenor intersperses relevant sections of Homer’s epic through the Beaulieus’ narrative.

²⁹ We note an inversion of the imagined unidirectional process of Native people assimilating to European lifeways.

³⁰ One is of course reminded of Richard Henry Pratt’s dictum for the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, “Kill the Indian, and save the man.”

³¹ In selecting the word “recognized” here, I mean to allude to Glen Coulthard’s *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*.

³² See “Wild Word Hunters.”

³³ Furthering their service as a defense rather than an assault, the novel explains, “This was a war provoked by an empire demon, more sinister than an ice monster, and the enemy of natural reason, and not by native visionaries, our sturdy ancestors, fur traders, or by the French” (109).

³⁴ Vizenor, in keeping with his emphasis on fluidity in written narratives, revised this novel into *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles*.

³⁵ Within the Indigenous framework upon which Vizenor draws, ties to physical space take on not only social, but sacred resonance as well. Following the war and upon their return to White Earth, the brothers find themselves incapable of using the tools for hunting they now experience as weapons of war. Basile explains, “we could never again live as hunters. We could never declare war on animals. The fur trade had decimated animals and weakened native totems. We could never overcome by stories the miserable memories of war, and endure the tormented visions of blood animals” (194). The traumas of war render them incapable of participating in further killing, but much more, they cannot heal through the stories that should tie them to place. The totems have been weakened, the bonds of human to other-than-human forebears are so damaged that the people cannot make themselves right.

³⁶ After all, as Cobb-Greetham points out, “Traveling with the Wild West show did not make Charging Elk and his companions any less “Oglala” than those who lived at the Stronghold like Strikes Plenty or those who stayed on the reservation and learned English like Scrub” (159).

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